Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills for youths

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IN 1973 Rev. Dr Alfred Darmanin introduced a programme for the Development of Skills (PDS) since he maintained that an education based on *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir-faire* (skills) and *savoir-être* (attitudes and values) is important. Later on, in the early 1980s a great deal of concern was felt in the Maltese Islands over a report about drugs drawn by Nick Dorne. There was an awareness that drugs had become a social problem. It was this that prompted the first training course for teachers to deliver Lifeskills in schools. The course was held in 1986 by Caritas as part of their drug prevention programme. It was facilitated by four persons coming from different backgrounds of social work, psychology and education. The course was coordinated by Prof. Maureen Cole who eventually was the first Dean of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing.

The subject known as Lifeskills was then introduced in two Church schools and later on in state and private schools. At present, it is a compulsory subject on the curriculum and the training of Personal and Social Education skills teachers has been ongoing at University since 1992. Interpersonal and Intrapersonal skills courses also form part of the component of other courses. A crucial aspect of the practice of Personal and Social Development (PSD), as the subject is now called, is that students have the opportunity to reflect upon and clarify their own attitudes and values. At times it also facilitates seeking professional help in dealing with issues which surface due to the greater self awareness promoted by personal skills sessions.

When students embark on a B.A. (Hons) in Youth and Community Studies course, the Personal Skills course is one of the first units they come across. This is no coincidence as one of the main aims of the course Core Skills 1 is to enhance personal growth and to promote group cohesion. In fact, I retain that the course on core skills is for life not just for youth work. Hopefully, the students will integrate skills which will empower them and help them to cope better with life's challenges.

The methodology used in Core Skills 1 has strong democratic roots and embraces empowerment at every stage of learning. The learning takes place through an active process and involvement of the whole person. The participants are learning from experience. This course, because of its very nature, promotes emotional literacy as well as examining attitudes and skills. These are skills we use every day to survive better in a healthy democratic community. This has always been stressed upon and sessions are held in groups of not more than 15 students in order to ensure that students are given the environment to truly learn experientially. The classroom is arranged in a circle or a horse-shoe formation such that each participant can view each other and will equal time and attention to individual participants.

Each session consists of stage cycles: the choice of activities that students are interested in throughout the educational experience, a general problem to address that choice develops in the session, information and observation to deal with the problem is provided and presented, suggested solutions elicited and opportunity to test, to clarify and to discover for themselves the validity of a solution. This elicits learning from the participants' own experiences, be they real or simulated through an activity – for example – role play.

The exercises would be pointless if not followed by and incorporated within reflection and discussion, which we call processing.

Any exercise or activity carried out during a personal skills session needs to be followed and concluded by processing. Without correct processing, the students would not be able to integrate and internalise what they have experienced during the particular exercise, and hence will also not be able to transfer the learning to real life. This would impede true personal growth and change, thus defeating the aims and rationale of a personal skills session.

Moreover, students participate and enjoy the sessions. If students do not enjoy what they are doing they will not benefit fully from the teaching.

ANALYSING CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY

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FOR those aged 50 and above, a reference to autism is quite likely to bring to mind Barry Levinson's 1988 film *Rain Man*.

In this film, Dustin Hoffman plays the role of Raymond Babbitt, an autistic savant who has spent almost his entire life in an institution before he is abducted by his brother, Charlie (played by Tom Cruise), who wants his share of the three-million dollar inheritance that their recently deceased father bequeathed entirely to Raymond. Hoffman's role landed him an Oscar for Best Actor (playing a disabled character quite often guarantees an Oscar). But, without taking anything away from Hoffman's accomplishment as an actor, the character of Raymond leaves much to be desired as far as autistic people go.

Understanding what is problematic about the portrayal of Raymond and why it should not be taken at face value is the type of task undertaken by an analytic approach that brings together disability studies and cultural studies. Undertaking such analyses is important as many people are likely to encounter disabled people only through the media, rather than getting to know disabled individuals as persons in their own right. Consequently, passing representations of disability found in films, and other types of narratives and in the media more generally, through a critical filter can help make people more aware of what is based on stereotypes and misconceptions and what is a more authentic portrayal of the lives of disabled persons. This knowledge can, in turn, help us gain a better understanding of how these persons experience living with a disability.

What, then, could be critiqued about *Rain Man*? First off, it gives the impression that all autistic people have a phenomenal memory, just like Raymond.

In reality, it is around 10% of people with autism who have such exceptional abilities. Reinforcing this aspect feeds into the idea that disabled people – including those who have autism – have outstanding abilities that somehow compensate for their functional impairments. But it does not work like that. Like the rest of the population, disabled people have a range of abilities and competencies. Some are exceptionally gifted – for example Stephen Hawking – but most are just like everybody else. Secondly, for someone with autism who has lived in a structured and institutionalised manner since infancy, Raymond's adaptation to the hectic and unpredictable world outside is highly unrealistic. Thirdly, the film does not in any way take contemporary social changes into account. The film was made in the late eighties, two decades after the start of deinstitutionalisation in the United States and the relocation of disabled people into community-based supported living services. With at least a million and a half dollars at Raymond's disposal, there was a golden opportunity for him to live within a community. Instead, the plot sends him back to his institution at the end of the film. And, finally, Raymond's sole purpose in the narrative seems to be to teach his brother a lesson about what is important in life and to help him become a better person.

Intersecting disability studies with cultural studies can help us appreciate all the implications of how the representation of a character with autism in *Rain Man*, and many other disabled characters in various narratives, are problematic. The main issue is that they are based on too many stereotypes and misconceptions for them to be authentic.

In turn, these representations serve to reinforce mistaken ideas about what it means to live with a disability. Thankfully, nowadays there are depictions of characters with disability that are more true to life. To stay with a focus on autism, one can refer to the films *I Am Sam* and *My Name is Khan*, the television series *Atypical* and *The A Word*, and the cartoon series *Pablo*, for example.

Analysing cultural representations of disability from a cultural and disability studies viewpoint – or reading such analyses written by others – can help us appreciate what lies beneath the surface of these representations.

Ultimately, the most important thing to keep in mind is that we cannot assume that we know what the lives of disabled persons are like simply by watching a film or reading a newspaper article.

However authentic the representations that we encounter may be, there is no substitute to listening to the direct life experience of disabled persons and being attentive to their personal perspectives about their own lives.